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ABSTRACT

The ways in which personal narratives, particularly of familiar stories, are used to ratify group membership are examined. Focus is primarily on co-narrated stories, in which more than one group member participates in the re-telling of a familiar story. A typical instance in which family members collaboratively construct a story is offered as an example. The narrative shows explicit markers that it is already known, with participants checking their own recollections and confirming each other's statements. Participants also make bids to co-tell the story, and disagreement about the story's point and details is expressed. Even group members not knowing the story indicate group membership by demonstrating shared values. In this case, often the "new" group member narrates a second, parallel story. A narrative illustrating this point is presented. Contains 13 references. (MSE)

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Ways Personal Narratives Ratify Group Membership

Neal R. Norrick

Personal narratives allow conversationalists to demonstrate group membership in several ways. When participants weave personal narratives into ongoing topical conversation, they make a piece of their past experience into present vicarious experience for the other participants. At the same time they record their current judgments and feelings about past events, which reveals attitudes and norms as well as suggesting topics for further attention. Their hearers produce back-channels and evaluative comments at appropriate points during the telling; they may even engage in co-narration to various degrees; and upon completion they may summarize and evaluate the story. If the story portrays the teller acting in appropriate ways, and if hearers express positive evaluations, the narrative event ratifies group membership for the teller; moreover, in providing the group with additional shared background information and another opportunity to negotiate evaluations, the event potentially ratifies group membership for everyone present. In addition, other participants often respond with parallel stories of their own, which tends to make the effects snowball.

We will return to consider such second stories and how they are fitted to their precursors later, but first I would like to discuss the most obvious instance of ratifying group membership through personal narratives, namely that which occurs during the

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co-narration of events familiar not only to the primary teller but to other participants as well. Any close-knit group will share events constitutive for their identification as a group, and tellings of these events have a special status for such groups. Since an event is recreated and more sharply defined through narration (and re-narration), even group members not present at the narrated event can come to know it well: thus children may tell an oft-heard anecdote about their parents' meeting, just as any new member will begin to absorb and participate in the telling of stories about the origins and history of the group. These "vicarious group events" are often the stuff of repeated co-narration in groups.

By contrast with individual stories which are tellable to the extent that they are topical and newsworthy, group stories are tellable in providing opportunities for co-narration; they must report events participants experienced together or at least vicarious group events familiar from past telling. Where individual stories seek to establish a shared past and to negotiate evaluations, familiar stories presuppose a shared past and tend to confirm shared values. Group members retell familiar stories to foster group rapport and to portray shared values. Moreover, they co-narrate familiar stories to ratify group membership. Often all these objectives coexist in the same narrative event, but we will concentrate on the ratification of group membership here.

The passage on the first slide is a typical example of a

group story jointly constructed by multiple members. The participants are four family members: Pat and Ralph are the parents of two college-age daughters, Amy and Mary, who are home for Thanksgiving. All four were involved to some degree in the events rehearsed in the narrative, though Pat identifies Amy as the primary character in "the story about you [i.e. Amy] and the little chipmunk." Pat has been describing a party she attended where she related this same story for the amusement of outsiders, but here the story is told as one familiar to everyone in the immediate family, all of whom are present.

Chipmunk

Pat: And I told the story about you and the little chipmunk out in the garage.
Mary: Oh [huhhuhhuhhuh.]
Amy: [I kept- I kept-] I was just thinking about that the other day. That thing scared the heck out of me.
Pat: With all with all the:
Amy: It was twice.
Mary: Huhhuhhuh.
Amy: It was twice. And the first time, "There's a rat in there, there's a big mouse in there. I saw it."
Mary: Hehhehhehheh.
Amy: "No, there's nothing in there." "Yes, I saw it."
Mary: I wouldn't believe her.
Pat: Well I went out. Remember, and set the bag- it was a bag of cans. That was when we were looking for the golf ball, cause you hit the ball in the can.
Amy: Yeah and then you found its little cubby holes in a box or something.
Pat: Well, what- what-
Mary: You found all the seeds, didn't you?
Pat: All the seeds.
Ralph: All the seeds in a plastic bag.
Pat: Right by the wood out there. And when we moved the wood to clean it there was the whole thing. It must have sat against the wood and then ate all hehhuh the huh [su(huhh)unflowers.]
Ralph: [All the] sunflower seeds. All the shells were in [the bag.]
Pat: [There were] shells everywhere.

Amy: Yeah and you guys wouldn't believe me:
Mary: Well I guess there was [something there.]
Pat: [Well I didn't] the first time but the second time I did.
Amy: Sca(ha)red me bo(ho)th [times hehehehe.]
Mary: [haha]haha.
Amy: And of course it happened to me. You know, nobody else.
Pat: Little sucker was living in the garage and
Ralph: Living [it up. Living high on the hog.]
Pat: [had it made. He was in out of] the cold and he had something to eat. And, and by the way, we have to get a bird feeder. I'll have to talk to ma and go to that Audubon place.

All the typical features of collaboratively constructed group stories are present here. First, there are explicit markers that the story is already known. Thus Pat prefaces the passage with a definite description "the story about you and the little chipmunk," which presupposes general familiarity with its basic gist; and she says remember as she gets into the actual narrative at line 14. Participants also check on the accuracy and completeness of their own recollections with open-ended statements like Amy's "and then you found its little cubby holes in a box or something" in lines 17-18 or with explicit questions, often in the form of a statement plus a tag as in line 20 "You found all the seeds, didn't you?" Conversely, participants confirm each other's statements, as does Amy in beginning two contributions with "yeah and" at lines 17 and 30. This give-and-take with its successive stages of agreement conduces to rapport. Second, there is substantial co-telling. Amy immediately ratifies the familiar character of the story by claiming that she had been thinking of it just the other day. At the same time,

she makes a bid to become co-teller of the story. After all Pat has identified Amy as the protagonist, and Amy wastes no time in trying to place her emotional response at the center of interest in the story. Participants demonstrate knowledge of the story and hence group membership particularly through addition of details. Ralph speaks little overall, but when he does, he contributes salient details, first that the seeds were "in a plastic bag" at line 22 and then that "the shells were in the bag" in lines 27-28.

Third, there is often disagreement about details and especially about the point of the story. As a consequence of differential memories and points of view, participants correct each other's accounts and vie for the right to formulate the story's point. When Amy says, "Yeah and you guys wouldn't believe me" at line 30, Pat objects, "Well I didn't the first time but the second time I did." Amy seeks to construct the story around her fright and her indignation at failing to convince the others of her credibility, but Pat and Ralph conspire to focus the story on the chipmunk's successful survival strategy: their joint assessments to this effect stand unchallenged as the final evaluation of the story following Amy's last gasp with "And of course it happened to <u>me</u>. You know, nobody <u>else</u>" in lines 36-37. Again Ralph's final contribution is short on words but long on meaning because he casts it in idiomatic and proverbial language: "Living it <u>up</u>. Living high on the hog." And Pat makes a closing determination that the story

was about animals in winter by moving to the related topic of feeding birds. Agreement on the final point of a story not only redounds to rapport, it also serves to fix the story as a building block in the family history. Co-narration ratifies family membership and values not just de jura by birth, but de facto by producing shared memories, feelings and values.

Of course, group members themselves sometimes tussle over the right to co-tell a story or to summarize its point; but the demonstration of membership goes beyond shared group events for co-narration to the demonstration of shared values. Even non-family member can gain a degree of acceptance by espousing values dear to the family; this is accomplished most expeditiously by constructing stories from one's own past which parallel those told in the family to which one seeks admission. Thus a person who cannot participate in co-telling a story familiar to group members can at least tell a story like it which repeats its action and reiterates its values. This strategy should become especially obvious in cases where daughters or sons in law have entered into a family by marriage but so far share few group events as a basis for co-narration. For such marginal family members who feel they are on temporary probation, displaying shared values should be of special importance. By way of illustration, the next passage shows a daughter-in-law attempting to ratify her de facto membership in her adopted family by telling stories from her own past. By fitting her second stories about thrift to her mother-in-law's preceding ones, the daughter-

in-law attests to her own values matching those of the family she has married into.

DARNED DISH TOWELS (simplified)

Frank: Grandma Imhof, she was the stingy one.
Ned: Claire has darned dish towels.
Frank: Her mother did it. Sure.
Lydia: Well see I said if you grew up in a house where your mother [patched wash clothes].
Ned: [Remember darning, Sherry?]
Sherry: I was going- "What are darned dish towels."
Ned: Well. It's when you don't want to say damn dish towels.

{General laughter}

Don't you call that process darning?
Lydia: But my mother just put them under the sewing machine and took two wash clothes and made one. And patched the middle of a wash cloth when it was worn out.
Ned: Your mother didn't invent that huh huh huh.
Lydia: And I said when you grow up like that it's hard to get with this world that throws things away.
Claire: {arriving} Here are darned dish towels.
Sherry: Huhhuh darned dish towels.
Lydia: But were you ever embarrassed? Claire? When you invited friends to your house, did you ever have to be embarrassed? I was embarrassed when the girls from town came.

{Laughter from Sherry, Brandon and others}

Ned: Our mother was embarrassed?
Lydia: And saw my mother's patched wash clothes. I tried to hide them really fast.

{Sherry and Lydia in two-party conversation from here on}

Sherry: We had a- my mom always had like a dish cloth that had holes in it? And I always still get holes in them before I throw them away. And he's like going, "Don't you think we need a new dish towel?" And she always had an old green pad that she used to scrub the pans with. And we always called it that ratty green pad. And so in my mind it's supposed to be like really aweful and ratty. Before you throw it away huhhahaha. And once a year I buy two new dish clothes whether I need them or not hehehe.
Lydia: Khuh khuhhuh.

Matriarch Lydia stands for frugality, which she learned from her

mother and grandmother, namely the "Grandma Imhof" described as "the stingy one" by Lydia's husband Frank right at the beginning. Although they laugh about frugality and claim to have been embarrassed by the frugal habits of their parents, all the family members tacitly endorse it as a primary (family) virtue. Ned and Brandon as sons of Lydia and Frank have as it were imbibed frugality, while their respective spouses, Claire and Sherry, seek to establish their in-group status through demonstrations of frugal behavior and, of course, appropriate stories. Sherry is particularly eager to confirm her family membership, since she has more recently married into the family and comes from a background less obviously frugal than does Claire. The conversations take place at the home of Ned and Claire where the others are visiting over the Thanksgiving weekend; in both, most of the participants remain seated at the dining room table, while Claire and Brandon move back and forth to and from the adjacent kitchen.

The whole family has gotten onto the topic of frugality--or stinginess as Frank insists on calling it--which suggests for Ned the example of darning dish towels from his wife's family and for Lydia her own mother's patching washcloths. Then in the midst of talk about darning dish towels, Lydia pieces together her story about being embarrassed when "the girls from town" came and saw her mother's patched washcloths. Apparently not just thrift itself but suffering embarrassment for it from outsiders assumes importance for Lydia. And although Lydia declares her

embarrassment about her mother's thrifty habits in such a way as to elicit laughter from her listeners, it should be clear from what she has said before how she values frugality. And it should also be clear that "the girls from town" represent the rejected wasteful attitudes Lydia cannot get used to.

It is most certainly clear to Sherry, who immediately seeks to paint herself in Lydia's colors by constructing a parallel "second story" in the sense of Sacks. Sherry's second story corresponds to Lydia's original in multiple ways. First, it casts Sherry in the same role as a daughter to a frugal mother. Note how Sherry initially begins her story at line 28 with "We had a-" then backtracks and self-corrects, placing her mother up front with "My mom always had . . ." Then it shows her taking over her mother's thrifty habits--despite objections from her husband, that is Lydia's son. And finally it lets her express the sort of laughing embarrassment about the habits which Lydia did, though she does not identify a particular outsider group like "the girls from town." Note especially the final partially formulaic statement that she buys new dish cloths "whether I need them or not" with accompanying laughter, which Lydia echoes. This degree of congruency between a second story and its original model goes beyond the sorts of structural parallelism Sacks describes, namely portraying the teller in the same role in a similar situation; we have here also the same emotional reaction toward other characters with regard to parallel habits, namely embarrassment vis-a-vis the girls from town for frugal behavior.

This is precisely what we might expect in the sort of family story at issue here.

In fact, Sherry may feel it is particularly important at this juncture to record her solidarity with Lydia as a frugal woman for several reasons. First, the more senior daughter-in-law Claire has just physically produced darned dish cloths to attest to her frugality. Second, Sherry has just admitted not even knowing exactly what darning is: in response to Ned's needling her with "Remember darning, Sherry?" at line 6, she replies, "I was going- 'What are darned dish towels'." And third, Lydia explicitly directed her story at Claire with her question "But were you ever embarrassed, Claire?" at line 19. Apparently Lydia has no doubt about Claire's frugality, seeking only confirmation from her with regard to embarrassment vis-a-vis "the girls from town." But Sherry feels the need to attest both to her thrift and to her embarrassment for it--and her story seems perfectly constructed to accomplish these ends in a low key way, while Frank, Ned and Brandon enter into a separate conversation of their own.

Sherry's narrative is quite ingenious in allowing her first to demonstrate her frugality and then to show herself embarrassed about it in public, which puts her into the same small group with Lydia. In this group, they can both tell stories seeing themselves pitted against outsiders, which accrues to group solidarity, in this case: family cohesion.

In conclusion, we have explored two sorts of stories especially conducive to the ratification of group membership: first, familiar stories which provide group members with complex opportunities for co-narration, allowing them to show how they fit into the group; and second, response stories which permit partial outsiders to demonstrate group values by portraying their own experiences in situations parallel to those described by in-group members. We have seen that familiar stories have their own characteristic conditions on tellability and participation rights along with special structural markers. Further, the response story we investigated illustrated correspondences with its predecessor beyond those Sacks identified for second stories.

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